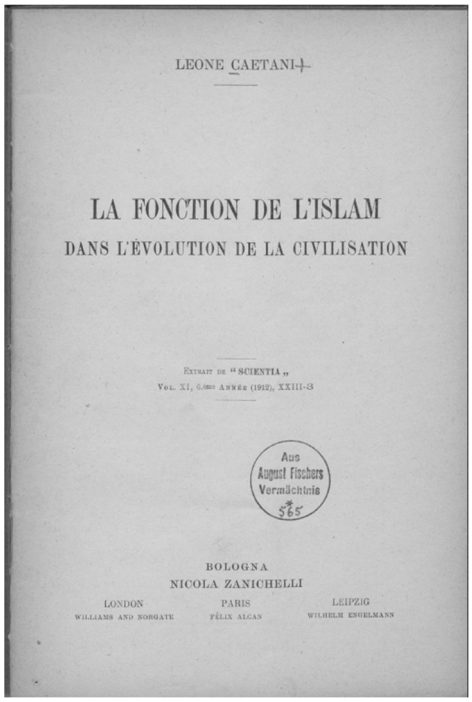
March 2026

“The Role of Islam In the Evolution of Civilization” By Leone Caetani, 1912


LEONE CAETANI

LA FONCTION DE L'ISLAM

DANS L'ÉVOLUTION DE LA CIVILISATION

Extrait de "SCIENTIA"
Vol. XI, 6.ème Année (1912), XXIII-3

Aus
August Fischers
Vermächtnis
565

BOLOGNA
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LEIPZIG — WILHELM ENGELMANN

Note from M. Dogan (bmdogan@hotmail.com), the compiler of this paper:

I’m an average-joe, who has curiosity about various topics. To satisfy my own curiosity, I translated (using chatgpt) Leone Caetani’s “The Role of Islam In the Evolution of Civilization”, from its French version. I thought Caetani’s essay had some very interesting arguments , and I wanted to put it out there for others who might be interested. I don’t have a social studies background, nor have training in how to write a paper, so I did my best with this one..

Thank you for the work of Professor Benedikt Koehler who made me aware of the existence of such an essay, intriguing me to research and translate it.

Introduction

Caetani wrote this essay (or the manifesto, if you will), in 1912, during the Italian invasion/occupation of what’s now Libya. Caetani, an Italian politician at the time, was one of the few, (and very unpopular) opposers to Italy’s imperial ambition of “conquering” Libya. Italy moved forward with its ambition and occupied Libya in 1911. What started as a swift victory against the Ottoman and local troops, turned into a prolonged and difficult conflict shortly afterward.

The conquerors, who ostracized and ridiculed Caetani during his opposition to the occupation, turned to this scholar of the Islamic World and asked, “We got ourselves into this mess.. Now, please tell us what we should do” … Caetani’s response to this request, by writing his essay, seems,

to say “You’ve occupied an Islamic country, without having the basic understanding of what Islam is… Let me explain it to you…”

Events that lead Caetani to writing the essay

The following references are used in this section:

R1: Leone Caetani and Italian cultural diplomacy by Alessandro Giuli January 4, 2022

R2: Gennaro Sanguilaino www.ilfoglio.it/politica APRIL 22, 2015

R3: Marconi Transatlantic Wireless Telegraph To the New York Times. March 3, 1912

R5: Un principe nel deserto: Leone Caetani nel Sinai e nel Sahara. I diari, le lettere, le fotografie (1888–1890). By valenTina sagaria rossi. Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Fondazione Leone Caetani, 2018

R6: Dr. Carmen Emanuela Ragusa,PhD Encounter between the Orient and the West. Orientalism in Leone Caetani’s Work .

A snapshot of Caetani’s life

Leone Caetani (Rome, Italy 1869, Vancouver, Canada 1935) , Prince of Teano and Duke of Sermoneta

His noble family include authoritative figures such as Pope Boniface VIII; Honorable Caetani, Foreign Minister in the Second Government of Rudin, and mayor of Rome; Michelangelo Caetani,a renowned Dante expert and governor of Rome at the time of its accession to the Kingdom of Italy.

Between 1888 and 1894 he travelled to Mediterranean Africa and Asia. In 1892 he graduated in History at the La Sapienza University of Rome

At an early age he started to learn Oriental languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. In his Orientalist studies he intended to focus on the original characters of the Islamic empire rather than to deal with the ideological and religious controversies. In 1905 the first volume of the "Annali dell'Islam" was published, while the next nine volumes appeared between 1907 and 1926, although all of them had been practically finished before 1915.

He started the great project of writing the history of the early Islam, with an introduction to the period preceding the political and spiritual action of Muhammad; this work was to be based on accessible Islamic sources, which he himself had studied with tireless fervor and with the help of capable collaborators (including Levi Della Vida, Gerardo Meloni and Michelangelo Guidi). Of the "Annali dell'Islam" thus designed, only 10 volumes emerged, which, however, were able to cover a significant period of activity of the prophet of Islam and that of the first four "orthodox" caliphs.

In order to preserve the precious cultural and scientific heritage, i.e. his valuable collection that had been developing since then, in 1924 Caetani promoted the establishment of the "Caetani Foundation for Muslim Studies" at the Accademia dei Lincei. (R6)

Of liberal democratic sympathies, he was a deputy of the Partito Democratico Costituzionale from 1909 to 1913. In 1911 he courageously opposed the Italo-Turkish war that led to the colonization of Libya. With the strong sense of duty and responsibility that he shared with other members of his family, he volunteered to fight in the First World War in 1915, acting for two years as an infantry officer before being discharged owing to ill health (R5)

After the end of his first marriage and the rise of Fascism, in August 1921 Caetani decided to move to Vernon,British Columbia,Canada, with his new partner Ofelia Fabiani and their daughter Sveva. He later became a Canadian citizen. (Wikipedia)

In 1935 the Fascist government punished him by depriving him of his Italian nationality and ejecting him from the Accademia dei Lincei. He died in Vancouver in the same year

Caetani's prowess as an athlete—a horseman, an oarsman, a tennis player, a mountaineer—who shared a private trainer in gymnastics with his younger brother

Although Caetani was not a Marxist, his writings gave them plenty to draw upon.

Towards the end of his life he felt disappointed: in his letter to his faithful student, to the enthusiastic Giorgio Levi Della Vida, he wrote such words as "I became what the English call a failure … I did not succeed at all." (R5)

Italian Invasion of Libya and Caetani

At the beginning of the last century, the young liberal and colonialist Italy was preparing to "wash away the shame" of the defeat of Adua (1896) with the invasion of Libya. (R1)

Leone Caetani was elected as a member of the Italian Parliament on the eve of the Fascist adventure. He was a Democrat with faith in liberalism and in the parliamentary system. (R6)

On September 29, 1911, recently returned to power, Giovanni Giolitti began military operations to conquer what Gaetano Salvemini, in the columns of La Voce, had called "the sandbox

The “pro-invasion” press had distinguished themselves in waging what historian Franco Gaeta would later describe as "the first great mass information and disinformation campaign in Italian history," describing Libya as an "earthly paradise," a land full of "obvious riches (R2)

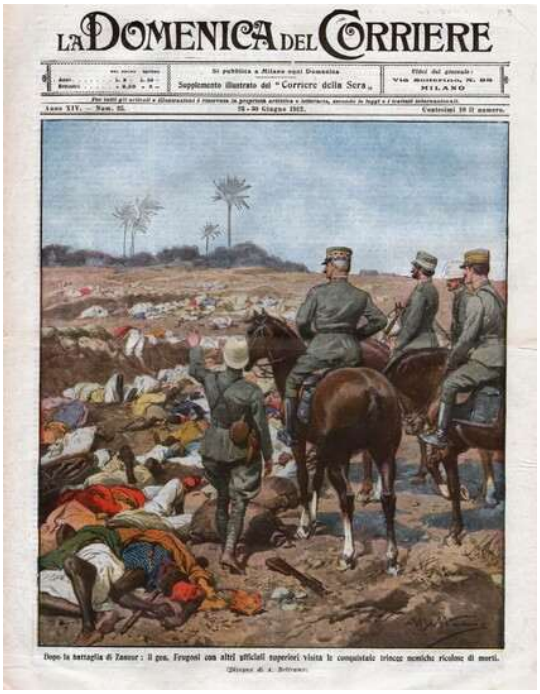
In 1911, in the midst of the debate in the Chamber of Deputies, the Roman nobleman Leone Caetani spoke out against the war decision.

Although not averse to a form of Eurocentric supremacism, Caetani warned the Italian ruling class of the effects of a poorly managed victory no less than of the risks of a war yet to be fought.

“Islam is the last phase of the great reaction of the East against the West… an ethnic and millenary opposition of two races and two civilizations that can never merge” (R1)

The “anti-Libyan” party was diverse; in addition to the young people of La Voce and Salvemini, there were Luigi Einaudi, Gaetano Mosca, Luigi Barzini, the great orientalist Leone Caetani, and a fiery young maximalist socialist, Benito Mussolini. (R2)

In spite of these unfavorable voices, the President of the Council, Giolitti, carried out his plans, and in September 1911 he decided to invade Tripolitania and Cyrenaica militarily. It was clear that no one knew the mentality of the indigenous people, and certainly not of the various tribes, inhabitants of the region; no one, except Leo Caetani, Who in June 1911warned the Parliament with a farsighted speech that disapproved the invasion mentioned that on the basis of the Libyan hostility towards the Turks, it was not advisable to think that the Libyans would be willing to surrender to the Italians (R6)



When in February 1912 the House of Representatives voted in favor of the decree annexing Libya to Italy, there was a lonely voice that, -in tune with beliefs that have matured in years of study and reflection- was definitely against the measure, pronounced a nice "no",

But the voice of the scholar seemed to be unimportant in the face of imperialist claims. With his "no", Caetani would become the target of a ruthless campaign of defamation and mockery. (R6)

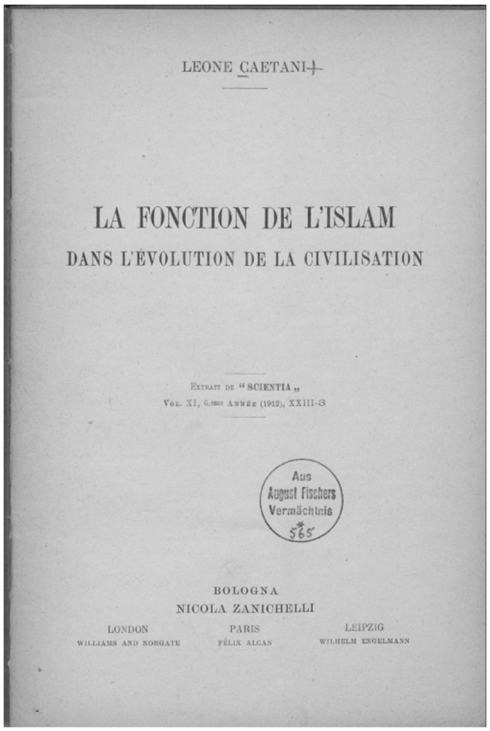
His knowledge of the Islamic problem has convinced him that it was a mistake that Italy should make war against Turkey for the occupation of Tripoli and the desert round about, and when he came to the chamber, he was the only member outside a few Socialists and Republicans, who voted against the bill of annexation. This created a tremendous storm in social and political circles, and it is no exaggeration to say that he is the most unpopular man in Italy. Letters and telegrams of vilification arrive in his mail every day. Demonstrations have taken place under his windows, when the mildest epithet hurled at him is "Abbassol. la giraffa!" ("Down with the giraffe!") an allusion to his long neck and person. (R3)

Interesting Note:

Caetani's colossal work, "Annali dell'Islam" has only been translated to one language so far: Turkish.... This translation was personally commissioned in 1926,by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the president of the young Turkish Republic. The same Mustafa Kemal, as a 30 year old Ottoman infantry officer, was waging a guerilla warfare against the occupying Italian troops in Libya in 1911/12.

M.Kemal (Atatürk) in Libya, in the black hat

Note: I translated the following, by chatgpt, from its French version, which can be found on the internet. In order to make life easy for anyone who'd like to fact-check with the original source, I narrowed down the page numbers (such as "5 to 6", or "13 to 14")



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La funzione dell'Islám nell'evoluzione della civiltà by Leone Caetani

“The Role of Islam In the Evolution of Civilization”

Pages 5 to 6

The political, economic, and religious relations between Europe and Asia, between East and West, form the canvas on which is drawn and stands out the dramatic embroidery of the history of the civilized world. The wars between ancient Greece and the Persian Empire, the conquests of Alexander, the golden age of world Hellenism, Rome’s domination over the whole Mediterranean basin and Western Asia, the birth of Christianity, the sudden and catastrophic appearance of Islam, the fall of Constantinople, and the Turkish invasion of Europe—all these are milestones, universally known, along humanity’s millennial road of progress toward its distant destinies, within the perpetual contrast between the two civilizations of Asia and Europe.

But the fervor that has guided research—so advanced and so profound—into the true causes of all phenomena, phenomena of nature as well as phenomena of society, compels today’s scholar not to content himself with merely knowing the outward, theatrical, and dazzling forms of history. In kings, in conquerors, in prophets, in the migratory movements of peoples, in ideological and religious currents, and in the intense passions that have brought about victory and defeat in so many battles, raised and destroyed so many empires and civilizations, we see above all the outward, material symptoms of obscure and complex sociological laws which, throughout the thousands of years not yet numbered during which their existence has asserted itself, have governed the entire spiritual and material evolution of humankind.

6 to 7

Today, when the European nations dominate so large a part of the Oriental world; today, when they have divided among themselves the last remnants of the worn-out empires of Africa and Asia, and when, as a result, imperialist passions have flared up so intensely along with the growing desire for territorial possessions; today, when more than ever it is useful, it is urgent to know what the Orient truly is, what meaning Asiatic civilizations possess, and what laws have determined the genesis of these civilizations — ignorance of these laws could be the cause of errors and humiliations that sooner or later would have to be redeemed at the cost of lost treasures and a terrible sacrifice of blood.

How necessary this study is, how indispensable a true understanding of the Oriental world, is sufficiently shown by the evidence that daily reveals the general ignorance — not only through the ingenuous improvisations of journalists, but even through the confessions of people who have long lived in the Orient without ever succeeding in penetrating to the depths of the Oriental consciousness. Last year, for example, in *The Nineteenth Century*, we read two very fine articles: one by the historian E. Bevan (August 1911), and the other by Sir Bampfylde Fuller (November 1911), former governor of a province of India; both were entitled *East and West*. The first of these authors sought to argue that between Orientals and Occidentals no true incompatibility exists, and that therefore a moral, intellectual, and religious fusion between them is not impossible. The

second, having had a more practical and direct knowledge of the Asiatic world, emphasized the moral differences between Orientals and Occidentals and the profoundly dissimilar conception of life held by the one and by the other.

Yet both of these writers ignored — or rather, neglected — the religious factor, which in reality constitutes the fundamental element of the difference and incompatibility between Christian Europeans and the Asiatics of various confessions, and especially Muslim Asiatics. The correct interpretation of religious phenomena seems to us to be the principal object of this study; indeed, this study may even be considered the keystone of any synthetic judgment of the Orient, and thus as determining the very concept that will necessarily inspire and guide every political or educational initiative toward non-European peoples.

7 to 8

In other words, the task is to respond to various questions that are singularly delicate to define and difficult to approach with a truly calm and impartial spirit; that is to say, we must ask ourselves: can Orientals adopt our culture, our institutions, and our religious, legal, and social conceptions? Do the religions they profess and the traditions they jealously guard constitute an obstacle to their development and to their moral and material progress? Ought we even to undermine their culture and replace it with our own? To what extent is the moral action of European culture upon Orientals a good, and to what extent is it for them an evil and a danger? Is it our duty to transform them into men like ourselves, to Europeanize them, or is it rather better to leave them as they are and to try to make them progress by stimulating their natural strengths, without destroying that “Orientalism” which has been produced by a millennial adaptation to the inescapable demands of nature and of life?

These are practical, immediate problems that the continual expansion of modern civilization has imposed on all European nations possessing Oriental subjects, but which have nowhere and at no time found a satisfactory solution: all governments have preferred to move forward empirically, blindly, without precise ideas, without a clear, distinct, and reasoned objective. Only the English in Egypt and in India — and partly also the Dutch in their Pacific possessions — thanks to a fortunate intuition of natural wisdom in political and administrative matters, understood of what nature the practical solution of these questions should be; but they did not push the inquiry deeply, nor raise practice to the level of a theoretical system.

Only a few months ago, such topics would have seemed to many people nothing but purely academic questions for us Italians. But events have moved quickly, and Italy, by the decree annexing Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, has now assumed very grave human responsibilities, which must be recognized. In a short time, Parliament will be called upon to study the laws that will serve to organize the two new African provinces and to resolve problems extremely complicated and difficult, the solution of which will cost many men and much money if legislative action is not inspired by a sound knowledge of the Oriental world and a calm appreciation of the needs of our new subjects — or, better said, of our new Muslim fellow citizens.

8

This new fact, of capital importance, is reason enough to define and briefly discuss, in a synthetic way, the characteristics of the Oriental phenomenon and, in particular, those of the Muslim phenomenon, which, for reasons we shall soon clarify, still offers advantages for our understanding and lends itself more readily to our analysis. We may even say that Islam is the most typical, the most characteristic event in the relations between Orient and Occident. Its birth and its raison d'être in the historical evolution of the Oriental world, if studied with impartial and serene attention, reveal better than any other subject of inquiry the hidden cause of so many diverse phenomena, seemingly distinct, in the history of the past and in contemporary events: they cast light on the whole Oriental world and may be of special use to us Italians, faced with the immediate — I would almost say imperative — necessity of new legislative work.

But even if this were not the case, is it not nevertheless our duty to recall, in order to draw lessons, the continuous and centuries-old contacts that Italy has had with the Muslim Orient? Modern Italy, born from the epic struggles of the Risorgimento, seems now almost to have forgotten that already at the end of the seventh century the swift ships of the Caliphs were ravaging the coasts of Sicily and returning to Africa with gilded chalices, gem-studded reliquaries, and precious candelabra from pillaged churches, while on their decks, among the black slaves who rowed the Saracen vessels, inconsolable women and young girls wept — some widows, others orphans — all condemned never again to see their native shore or the fertile lands along the slopes of Etna.

8 to 9

Since then, whether through commerce or through war, for almost thirteen centuries, Italy has had, with varied vicissitudes, relations that were never interrupted with the followers of Islam, as patrons, slaves, or rivals. Was Sicily not, for centuries, a Muslim province? Have African corsairs not been the scourge of the coasts of the Tyrrhenian and Aegean Seas almost up to our own time? The entire political and commercial life of the Italian maritime republics unfolded in a continuous emulation — sometimes peaceful and economic, sometimes military and belligerent — with the Muslim states along the Mediterranean coasts.

The theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the medicine of the School of Salerno, the rudiments of the physical sciences in the first Italian universities, and even Dante's visions of the supernatural world — all of this was inspired and nourished by ancient knowledge, collected, transmitted, and formulated by the Arab theologians of Cordoba and Baghdad, who for a time served as masters to barbarian Europe. Later, the fervent commercial and political life of our republics led them to maintain continuous relations, through immediate contact, with the Muslim world.

And in recent years, the growing exchange of goods with the Orient, the national movements in Turkey, the Moroccan complications, colonial possessions, our African ambitions, and the very recent and painful illusions regarding the sentiments of the Tripolitan populations toward us — all these facts remind us, or at the very least should constantly remind us, that beyond a coast that is already ours, there exists a civilization and a religion that remain irreducibly hostile to us, forming an insurmountable barrier of racial prejudices, confessional hatreds, and centuries-old traditions.

9 to 10

Today, Italy, in occupying Tripoli and Cyrenaica, finds itself once again in immediate, direct contact with the Islamic "Cerberus," and the cruel massacres of our brothers in the palm groves of Sciara-Sciat on 23 October 1911 were for Italians a painful surprise, but perhaps also a useful lesson. England, France, and Russia, in building their immense empires amid Muslim populations, acquired long and painful experience, all marked by assassinations, arson, and horrible tragedies. Despite generous efforts, extensive intellectual and material preparation, and incalculable sacrifices of life and money over long periods, all of these powers found in Islamic civilization and peoples an irreducible resistance and social forces of tenacious rebellion that no human means could, I do not say break, but even merely bend.

For all European nations — and today also for Italy in a particular way — it is important, and indeed a true duty, that not only Orientalists and specialists in Islam in their solitary work, but also the public and popular consciousness, acquire knowledge of the origin, nature, and causes of this singular phenomenon. This phenomenon, in the sinister light of conflagrations and amid battles, put into question, about thirteen hundred years ago, the very existence of Christianity and European culture, and it still tightly binds the conscience of 260 million men, all agreeing in a single, vivid sentiment: aversion toward Christianity and European civilization.

But it is not enough to explain how the birth of Islam could have occurred; for us Europeans, as rulers or collaborators of Muslim subjects, there is more direct usefulness and urgency in understanding why this confession was able to triumph victoriously over our faith and our civilization in Asia and Africa, and why even today, unconquered and invincible, it persists in implacable hostility toward us, and, under this banner, continues to expand its frontiers in all parts of the world.

A phenomenon of such imposing proportions, which, after a long and multifaceted evolution, still retains an intense and tenacious life, must have very complex and distant causes; it must root itself in the deepest regions of Oriental consciousness and express the essential sentiments of this ethnic soul. Therefore, the problem must be fully elucidated through our analysis, for it is only thanks to a correct understanding of this problem that we can, in the near future, hope to reduce the most formidable resistance and to introduce, under favorable auspices, a harmonious *modus vivendi* between Italians and Muslims in Tripolitania.

11

Due to the lack of documents and the prevalence of religious and racial prejudices, our judgment of the faith that came from Arabia and of the revolution it sparked in the development of Oriental consciousness has always been mistaken and partial. It is only today, as modern critical scholarship gradually dismantles and destroys ancient, outdated religious and racial prejudices, that we can discern, through the clouds of a past now abolished, the broad outlines and principal reasons of this frightening Muslim drama, in which the swift warriors of Arabia, within a few decades, suddenly traversed almost the entire known world as triumphant conquerors.

The destructive pickaxe of scientific, impartial, but relentless analysis — which has attacked all our social, moral, and religious institutions, painstakingly erected to meet the urgent needs of the generations before us — now strikes also at the venerable institutions of Islam. It renews their significance and reveals the generative forces contained within them. Modern analysis of the

Islamic phenomenon transforms its entire inner meaning, as it had appeared to the scholars of the 19th century, expands its foundation, and disentangles its moral and material origins, so complex, throughout the ancient history of Asia and the relations of Asia with Europe.

The birth of the new faith no longer appears in the simplified form in which our fathers conceived it; it is no longer the old story of an impostor prophet who suddenly ignited in the souls of his followers a religious flame, sending them forth to conquer the world while dazzling them with the illusion of converting humanity to the new word and redeeming themselves, along with all humanity, from sin and error, by promising paradisiacal sensual delights that electrified and blinded them.

It is no longer true to say that Muslim bands, *excited by the flame of a religious belief, under the illusion of being the immediate instrument of God's will*, triumphed solely through the irresistible force of such a sentiment over enemies weakened and aged by a millennial and corrupt culture.

11 to 12 to 13

All of this is but fables, visions of another time. The truth is quite different — perhaps less dramatic, but much broader, more complex, more gigantic, and above all less personal: it is no longer the conscious work of a single man and a handful of daring warriors, but the integration of a global social revolution, begun centuries and centuries before Muhammad, through an evolution that even today is far from having completed its grandiose arc.

Muhammad, the Qur'an, Islam — these were the determining incidents, the occasional veneer of one of the most complicated, marvelous, and singular events in human history, a new variation on the fundamental theme of world history, namely the endless action and reaction between East and West, the perpetual exchange of ideas and merchandise, of men and things, of religions and arts, of military expeditions and moral conquests between Asia and Europe, between the two main centers of human civilization.

Muhammad, the unconscious creator of global Islam, neither wished nor believed he was founding a new religion: he called for a return to the preexisting religion, or perhaps better, the purification of a religion that, according to him, already existed, demanding only the abandonment of secondary deities in order to concentrate worship on the greatest, the only true divinity, already known throughout Arabia, because it was perhaps the oldest of all: Allah. But in his mind, the reform had no character of universality: the prophet never envisioned political conquest or the moral conquest of humankind; he did not even set himself the goal of converting all Arabia, but concerned himself only with his own people, those of his country and blood — those he knew best and who were closest to him. To others, he gave no thought; it seems as if he even ignored their existence.

When Muhammad died in 632, only a part of his native peninsula obeyed his commands, and the union of tribes he achieved in the two cities of Mecca and Medina was far more a political and military principality than a religious community. The Arabs were naturally irreligious and desired no new belief; but they recognized in Muhammad a man of genius to whom it was good to submit. Muhammad died leaving no instructions, unconcerned with the future of his state or the future of his doctrines; he did not even think to preserve the exact text of his revelations.

13

The development of the Muslim community in the early period following the death of its founder was almost exclusively political and military — a development that in many of its phases resembles the territorial and military expansion of Rome. The community created by Muhammad, by the fact that it was the most powerful in Arabia and dominant among a population naturally warlike, predatory, and restless, was drawn into the conquest of the peninsula during the reign of the first Caliph. Once the conquest was completed, and the political and military union of all Arabia was suddenly realized, the national unity of a people endowed with the most turbulent energies of life created the otherwise fatal and inevitable conditions that led the Arab people — already assailed by cruel needs and eager to escape an arid, poor, and ungrateful homeland — to rush to plunder the riches of Persia and Rome.

And thus, the conquest of Asia and Africa was carried out, unforeseen and unimagined by anyone, but thanks to a natural convergence of causes and effects.

Yet in this very fact, up to that point, there would have been only the fortuitous repetition of one of the many political revolutions that had shaken and ruined Asia from the time of Hammurabi to that of Zenobia and the Sassanid kings: the birth of another empire, more or less long-lived, and nothing more.

But precisely this mysterious concurrence of laws — accidental, necessary, or predetermined — which governs the life of all beings on our planet, caused the expansion of the Arab warriors to coincide with a profound moral crisis among the Asian and Semitic peoples, who at the same time were subject to the supremacy of the Aryan race, strengthened by the political institutions of Rome and the Hellenized Christianity of Byzantium. All of the Orient found itself in a state of quiet and implacable revolt against Byzantine domination and desired to free itself, not only politically, but also morally and religiously.

13 to 14

This current of separatist ideas and sentiments was not recent; it had not been created by Romano-Christian-Byzantine domination, but one can say that it had existed since time immemorial, albeit in a latent and unconscious form. It is the manifestation of this very ancient, indestructible moral contrast that has always made any lasting union of sentiment between the peoples of Asia and those of Europe impossible. The separation has always existed and is of very ancient origin, though it has not always been sudden and obvious. Historical vicissitudes first brought it to light during the wars between the Greeks and the Persians in the 5th century BCE, and it developed further with the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE and the reign of the Seleucids, who attempted the vain enterprise of fusing East and West.

It then gradually became more pronounced during the apex and decline of Hellenistic hegemony in Western Asia; so that it was no longer limited to the Semitic world alone but extended to all of the Orient. This was the moral driving force that led to the fall of the Seleucids in Asia; it was the more vivid sentiment that animated the great Mithridates in his inexpiable wars against Rome: it is due to this prince’s hatred of the West that the terrible massacre of 150,000 unarmed Italians in the cities of Asia Minor occurred in 88 BCE.

The same anti-European hatred led the Parthians to fight Roman power; in India, it gave rise to national dynasties opposing the successors of Alexander and took its religious form in Buddhism: Buddhism, while absorbing the artistic influences of Greece, expelled Hellenism from the valleys of the Indus and the Ganges. As the anti-Hellenistic movement grew in strength and intensity, it contributed to the continuous retreat of European civilization and influence in Central Asia, elevated the national Sassanid dynasty to power in Persia in the 3rd century CE, and destroyed the Arsacid power because they themselves were steeped in Hellenism.

It was this same irresistible current of Orientalist reaction that finally contributed to the restoration of the national religion of Iran, Mazdaism. Due to the heightened intensity of anti-European aversion, Rome could no longer follow the example of Alexander the Great, and still less could it extend its borders permanently beyond the Euphrates, where populations, already filled with hostile sentiments toward the West, remained ever more stubbornly resistant to Hellenistic civilization.

15

Nestorian propaganda, which carried the Christian word to the heart of Asia and China, represented in itself a religious aspiration and concern for spiritual elevation that were independent of, and even contrary to, Byzantium and Rome; yet the Nestorian symbol had only a brief existence, because it was not sufficiently “oriental,” and it disappeared like a cloud before the Islamic tempest.

Such has been the perpetuity and intensity of Oriental nationalism — a general movement that was neither inspired nor directed by anyone, but whose appearance occurred simultaneously and unconsciously throughout that part of Asia where European influences had made themselves felt. Certain phenomena in history, because of their contemporaneity and similarity across the most diverse regions of the world, reveal the existence of general laws relating to human psychology, which they all obey blindly, and of which until now we have had only a vague impression. The anti-European reaction of Asia is one of these phenomena, one of the few that it is given to us to study and understand most readily.

Yet the development of this vital contrast between the two portions of the civilized world was complicated by the appearance of Christianity, which constituted one of the greatest innovations, one of the greatest revolutions in human history. It is appropriate to pause for a moment to examine this phenomenon.

When, roughly seven centuries before Islam, the great Asian religion destined to dominate the world was born — the Christianity of Jesus and of Saint Paul — the moral conditions of civilized societies had become entirely exceptional, ripe for a profound moral transformation; but this transformation occurred under circumstances that gave rise to an inextricable confusion between opposing tendencies. The religion of Western peoples, at the beginning of the Christian era, had not followed the moral, intellectual, and political progress of the Hellenic and Latin world as a whole, and this world, tormented by the inner sense of this imbalance, sought to elevate both the content and the external manifestations of the religious sentiment that animated it.

15 to 16

It was especially Rome and Italy that, at this moment, possessed a keen need for religious fervor and mystical piety—sentiments that no longer found satisfaction in the old national cults or in the official religion of the Roman state, which was characterized by a dry, positive ritualism and self-interest—a religion too closely bound to the small affairs of political life and stripped of all sentimental warmth. The West, in relation to the East, thus found itself in conditions of manifest religious inferiority: those who were the masters of the world, by virtue of their military and political organization and their high moral qualities, were—an extraordinary fundamental contradiction—in a state of religious inferiority with respect to their Oriental subjects, precisely those whom the solid citizens of Rome despised the most.

The Westerners, obeying a fundamental sociological law, felt irresistibly the need to elevate the content of their religious beliefs to the level of their heightened civilization. It was to this very keen need that the East responded with exuberant generosity, so that all Asian beliefs rushed to conquer Rome. Given their moral superiority, the intensity of the sentiments that animated them, and the moving and dramatic character of the various Eastern traditions, the triumph of Eastern religions was great and rapid.

The moral and religious revolution that later came to be called Christianity was inevitable: it was a fatal event. To satisfy the profound moral need and fill the spiritual gaps among Western populations, the religions of Asia, all inflamed with spiritual zeal and filled with intense passion, competed with one another; the West was flooded, overwhelmed by the religious East, which conquered Europe thanks to the vividness and depth of sentiments that the West had not yet known and upon which it threw itself with frenzy.

In Roman history, this was a moment when it seemed that the union of all the peoples of Western Asia and Europe was being realized, in a fusion—or a mixture, or a blend, if one wishes to put it that way—of religions and beliefs. Rome became a true religious Tower of Babel: there was no exotic or bizarre cult that did not find followers ready for every extravagance and sacrifice. On the imperial throne ascended men of all races, and even in large numbers Orientals, who protected and favored these same Eastern cults that the old Senate of Republican Rome had once forbidden and excluded, even punishing their adherents with death.

17 to 18

The religious fusion was only apparent, and in this sense, it was even of brief duration, although the Eastern cults, and among them primarily the Persian religion of Mithra, spread—thanks to the military garrisons—from the banks of the Danube to the sunlit plains of Andalusia and the inhospitable regions of Mauritania. It was from the fusion of the different Eastern beliefs and their intimate conjunction with the Western soul, whose needs they easily adapted to, that the so-called Catholic Christianity arose—a hybrid and singular mixture of primitive beliefs and rites with highly elevated religious conceptions and sublime moral teachings.

This religion, having obtained official consecration from Constantine and having become sovereign in the West, thus acquired a particularly European appearance and physiognomy and returned triumphantly to the East, where it sought to rule in the spiritual domain in the same way that imperial authority already ruled in the political, economic, and administrative domains.

Thus the East found itself invaded and oppressed by its own weapons; although Christianity, in its aspect and content—through which it returned from the West to the East, imbued with Western logic, philosophy, sentiment, and law—was no longer the belief that the Eastern soul required, the East nonetheless had to endure it.

But scarcely had Christianity become the official religion of the empire—an institution essentially Eastern by origin, essence, and traditions—when the moral and spiritual discord between East and West reappeared, veiled and unnoticed as it was, a discord to which nothing could henceforth provide remedy, because it was founded on ineluctable differences of race, customs, and traditions.

Other accidental circumstances even served to sharpen this primordial, instinctive sentiment, which, while varying in intensity, always maintained the separation between the Asian world and the European world as clear and irreparable. The heavy hand of Rome, implacable toward any political initiative expressed within the empire's own limits, had left in the East, especially among the Semitic races of Western Asia, a deep leaven of hatred against the West, personified in the imperial authority of Rome. Every internal revolt, every civil war, caused new and terrible miseries and only ever increased the intensity of irreducible opposition between masters and subjects.

18 to 19

Such a great and constant aversion of the Semitic world toward Aryan Rome—which appears, for example, in the Sibylline Books, in apocalyptic literature, and in a thousand other documents of the time—had, in the early period of struggle, served the purposes of both Eastern and Christian propaganda, because the hatred of Rome had been confused with hatred of Hellenic and Roman paganism.

But later, when Christianity replaced the official cult of Republican and Imperial Rome, the Orthodox Church, defended by the emperors, saw these same animosities converge toward it—animosities that had been valuable allies during the harsh trials of its bloody beginnings.

It was then that dissident doctrines arose in great numbers, bitter and violent, especially in Asia and Africa—doctrines which the Church, guided by the political unity of the Roman Empire and desirous of realizing the unity of faith of humankind, combated tirelessly through its rigid, odious, and greedy hierarchy, labeling them as errors, schisms, and heresies.

Absolute uniformity does not exist in nature, and even less so in the world of moral and social phenomena. What were called "heresies" were, in reality, in their innermost essence, merely unconscious, instinctive social movements—blind efforts of the Eastern soul to emancipate itself from the religious and sacerdotal yoke of the official Church, to recover, by detaching and distinguishing itself from it, its ancient freedom of belief and the local characteristics so dear to primitive sentimentality, always individualistic.

The West, personified in the Church, claimed to make religion a single, universal entity—an institution that, in its material constitution, could represent the monotheistic unity it professed and introduce into the world the almost direct reign of God, modeled on the bureaucratic structure of the Roman Empire.

In this way, the millennial conflict between East and West, in the first centuries of the Christian era, took on exclusively religious characteristics, which obscured the understanding of contemporaries and concealed the true nature of the struggle.

In the so-called heresies of the Syrians, Copts, Armenians, Arameans under Persia, Nestorians, and other smaller groups, there was not so much a deep conviction in a truth different from the Orthodox truth as an unconscious, irresistible psychological necessity to think and believe differently from the Orthodox and in a more Asiatic manner.

Conceived in these terms, the struggle became sterile, irreparable, and without possible resolution. The four centuries that followed, from the third to the seventh, were a period of intense moral martyrdom, during which the populations of Asia, exasperated, disgusted, and degraded, fell into a state of acute moral anxiety—that is, the psychological state most conducive to the development of the seeds of great revolutions.

19

After the triumph of Christianity, the direct domination of Rome was followed by that of Byzantium, which, however, was the political heir of Imperial Rome and maintained, through Roman institutions, the hegemony of the Aryan-European race and civilization in Asia. Byzantium, by uniting the civilizations of Rome and Greece within itself, continued—with a perseverance that sometimes reached the cruelty of persecutions—the task of Europeanizing the Asian nations. At the forefront of this effort were all the Semitic nationalities: the Syrians, the Arameans, and the Arabs who populated Western Asia, as well as the more heterogeneous nationalities of Egypt and North Africa.

The East, often without even realizing it, always perceived a danger to its own spiritual individuality in the direct influence of Western civilization—whether Hellenistic, Romano-Byzantine, or modern European—with its commercial, practical, dominating, and rationalist tendencies. Our culture dissolves, like an acid, the moral fabric of the Asians; it primarily acts to level and equalize, and it possesses secular and rationalist directions—that is, the very characteristics that the Orient rightly hates and fears most, because an infallible instinct makes it foresee its own moral death in all of this.

It is for this reason that, through a spontaneous movement of self-preservation, the Orient, while absorbing from Hellenistic and Western culture a significant quantity of elements useful for its development—and which could adapt to the spirit, aspirations, and traditions of Asia—nevertheless no longer wished, and could never again submit, to the domination of the West, especially when that domination still claimed to be moral and religious.

20 to 21

The concepts of fatherland and race are foreign to the spirit of the Orientals, where instead the religious sentiment predominates, and in such proportions that in the East religion wholly encompasses the social, political, juridical, literary, and artistic life of the peoples. Conversely, the Western soul is from the outset inclined to distinguish, from the religious sphere, what can exist and endure without necessarily being religious; there is within it a tendency toward secularization.

It is this very tendency that led to the creation of rationalist Roman law and that constitutes the generative force of the scientific, positivist spirit of the Western races. A Church such as that of Rome, with its grandiose hierarchy and its claims to political and global hegemony, is in reality but a secularization, in cooperative and organic form, whereas for the Oriental it must remain in the domain of pure feeling and retain purely individualistic characteristics. The disagreement is thus by essence perpetual, without remedy, without possibility of reconciliation. This explains how, during the gloomy centuries of the Later Empire, the opposition of the Semites, the Asiatics, and the Africans to the government of Byzantium could develop above all in the religious domain and turn against Orthodox Christianity—Christianity itself being born of the mentality and sentiments of generations of theologians steeped in philosophy and impregnated with decadent Hellenism.

The inextricable difficulties and dogmatic and theological subtleties in which the Hellenic spirit—always essentially rationalist—delighted, and in the midst of which Christian thought had lost its direction, had shaken the religious conscience of the Orient, which by nature was simplifying, more primitive, yet animated by a much more intense passion, and for that very reason often blind and illogical.

Thus in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt there unfolded, from the fourth to the seventh century, that sad, monotonous series of barren religious struggles between the empire of the West and its Eastern subjects—an endless and useless rending, a sterile conflict in which the Orient, devoid of all moral unity and of all awareness of its true spiritual needs, and at the same time lacking any means of attaining even the moral freedom it so greatly required, could no longer deliver itself from the oppressive yoke of Byzantium's ecclesiastical hierarchy.

On the other hand, the Orient could neither alter its nature, its spirit, and its sentiments, nor submit to the ambitions of perfect religious uniformity which the Church and the emperors foolishly imagined they could impose upon their Asiatic and African subjects. The psychological characteristics of a people are as difficult to change as the color of their skin and hair or the shape of their skull. Thus, all measures taken by the emperors proved vain; they failed in their persistently repeated attempts to abolish the separatist religious aspirations of their Oriental subjects; it was not possible, by means of imperial decrees or the rulings of ecumenical councils, to mold the souls of the Orientals into the forms desired by the high official Christian clergy.

21 to 22

For many long years—indeed, for centuries yet longer and more wretched—there accumulated in the Orient an immense force of exasperation concentrated against Byzantium and against the West. Though incapable of assuming form and achieving unity of direction, it nevertheless eventually produced a moral rupture most dangerous for the social peace and political unity of the Byzantine state.

From the ever sharper opposition between such vast social forces, there arose, in the seventh century, an inner disequilibrium of civil society, analogous to that which had manifested itself at the dawn of the Christian era. The Romano-Byzantine world fell into full decomposition, and there was no one who did not perceive it. The Orient felt itself swept up in the general ruin of both State and Church, and it became conscious of an inner moral inferiority which condemned it to perish before the West itself. It thus required a symbol—something impossible to define in words, or rather an illusion—that would enable it to protect itself against the demon, and to remain entirely

free, separate, distinct. And in the very idea of distinction the human spirit always places the sentiment of superiority—superiority, that is, over the world and over the consciousness of the West.

In the period extending from the fourth to the seventh century of the Christian era, that is to say, until the irruption of Islam, the part of the Orient closest to the Mediterranean Sea was that in which the psychological contrast between the two civilizations had assumed the most striking features, making of Western Asia, in a certain sense, a battlefield where the two opposing tendencies clashed. This portion of the Asiatic continent had thus become, more than any other, ripe and ready for a great spiritual and political revolution: here the soul of the population was reduced to the state of a truly combustible matter, ready to ignite as soon as it was touched by the spark necessary to set aflame a mass so prone to combustion—an intimate reaction, indeed, through which it tended, unconsciously and intensely, toward its own salvation. Of its passionate expectancy it gave proof in the expansion, in the so brutally violent surge, of the Muslim conquests.

22 to 23

Into the well-ploughed soil of the Asiatic soul, fertilized by unspeakable sufferings and irreducible rancors—directed unconsciously against the Westerners and against the Aryans—there finally fell the seed, rough yet naïve and simple, of the doctrine preached by the Prophet of Arabia.

It was the call of the preacher of Mecca that, quite by chance, succeeded in giving unity and direction to the progressive movement of Asiatic sentiment. Not that he proclaimed anything new, for his religious ideas were nothing more than an imperfect reworking of Judaic and Christian conceptions, rejuvenated for the Oriental soul through a return to the most distinctive characteristics of the most ancient Asiatic beliefs. Muhammad had, unknowingly and solely, the merit of pruning, simplifying, and strengthening a faith which, in Christian dogmatics—owing to the rationalist and philosophical tendencies of the West—had lost itself amid clouds of theological subtleties and abstruse sophisms, stripped of material reality and religious warmth, whereas the Asiatic soul, and above all the Semitic soul, aspired to enter directly into communication with God, freed from the constraints and contradictions of the West, independent of sacerdotal tyrannies and monopolies.

Islam gave new life and vigor to all the religious individualism of the Orient, rebellious against the ecclesiastical yoke of Byzantium and Rome—a yoke even more rigid and harsh than the civil and military yoke of the empire.

Everywhere that religious faith is truly felt, there arises an irresistible tendency to enter into direct communion with God without the interposition of intermediaries. The Christian Church, in becoming the official religion of the Empire, transformed itself into a vast administrative organization; to employ a modern and rather ugly word, we may say it “bureaucratized” itself, like the military or financial administration—that is, it took on the very characteristics which, in religious matters, are most odious to the Oriental. The abolition of all forms of clergy was one of the chief merits of Islam and one of the reasons for its extraordinary success.

23 to 24

The Orient was not in search of a new creed: it had no need of one. Christianity itself had been little more than a new name, by means of which the very ancient and indestructible heritage of paganism had been able to take on a new varnish. The true need was to regain religious freedom and to detach itself from Byzantium, from its clergy, and from the whole of the West. These two liberations became largely possible through Islam, which, though it altered certain aspects, certain rites, and certain outward forms of worship and gave everything a new name, signified above all a complete and absolute emancipation from the West, while preserving intact the very essence of the beliefs and superstitions that form the foundation of the Oriental conscience in its confused aspirations toward moral and material well-being, as it conceives them.

Such was the unforeseen function of the Islamic movement: the new doctrine, conceived by its founder for the benefit of his native region and his compatriots alone, became, in its first phase—through the conquests within and beyond the Arabian Peninsula—the moral symbol of political, moral, and national unity, and of the superiority of the Arabs over the other nations of the earth. But afterwards, with extraordinary rapidity, there came the seed destined to give Islam the character of universality.

For in fact the Arabs shaped the new dominion according to the mistaken idea that they would always remain the sole masters and the sole Muslims: all the rest of the world was to remain perpetually in the condition of subjects and infidels, whose only reason for existence would be to furnish the victors and rulers with a continuous and abundant tribute of wealth. Outside the Arabs, there would be no Muslims, because in principle the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” were synonymous: the Muslims, according to the Caliphs, were to live entirely at the expense of the non-Muslim world. The one group was to enjoy all the advantages and all the power, the other was to submit to all the burdens and all the obligations. It was upon such a social system that the first Caliphs believed they had given a permanent foundation.

24 to 25

But there existed among the people a more naïve and more deceptive illusion.

The Arabs, though brave, bold warriors and intelligent, were uncultured men—greedy, sensual, and violent. They knew little or nothing; they cared little or not at all for Islam, of which they were defenders only insofar as it was a nationalist movement and an instrument of government. Jealous of their own political hegemony and of the material advantages deriving from it, and further blinded by an excessive national pride, they completely ignored the evolution of their subjects, whom they deemed unworthy of the concern or care of the dominant race. It was from so great a contempt and so great an indifference that the vanquished drew profit, to secure the most complete revenge upon their conquerors, by choosing a path so utterly unexpected that the Arabs, although deeply angered, were unable to oppose it with any serious resistance and allowed themselves almost cowardly to be oppressed and overwhelmed. They did not at all grasp its scope or its meaning, and they found themselves undone almost before they realized that their power was in danger.

Thus there occurred what no one had anticipated. Since the Eastern Christians—Syrians, Arameans, Copts, and Africans—had fought with tenacity for centuries against the Byzantines, against the Roman and Orthodox Church, and against the dualist Mazdeism of the Persian kings, apparently because they wished to remain faithful to a deep religious conviction, it would have seemed logical to conclude that these same populations would also resist, with equal obstinacy

and constancy, the new creed that came from Arabia, all the more so since it was inspired by sentiments profoundly hostile to the fundamental conceptions of Christianity (the Trinity, the Incarnation, the dogma of the Son of God, etc.).

Quite the opposite occurred: the irreducible resistance shown against the Western Byzantines and the Aryan Sassanids melted away without difficulty before the Islamic religion. The populations subdued by the Caliphs of Medina and Damascus, awed by the astonishing triumphs of the Arab militias—in the name of the Orient, against the entire West—adopted the religion, the language, and the customs of their masters. More adroit than the latter, they recognized in Islam a means of becoming the equals of their conquerors and of enjoying the same advantages as they. They felt dimly, in the new social organization brought from the Arabian desert, the expression of a political and religious sentiment more genuinely Oriental and entirely in harmony with their mentality. They became conscious, almost instinctively, that Islam, by virtue of its character as a merciless war against Christian West, signified a struggle against incomprehensible dogmas, against the tyranny of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, against the yoke of parasitic monastic orders, and against all that, in the Hellenistic-Aryan empire, seemed odious to the Orient.

25 to 26

With Islam, the Orient once again became the true Orient, free and independent from the tyranny of the West; in Islam, it found its redemption and salvation. Thus, almost in spite of the Arabs themselves, Islam became the instrument through which the Orient—that is to say, the peoples of Asia and Africa subjugated by the first Caliphs—regained their moral equilibrium and emancipated themselves from the yoke of a civilization and a religion which they abhorred. Having once more become fully Oriental, they now came to feel themselves equal to, and even victoriously superior to, their age-old enemy, the Western Aryan.

The community of race, of sentiments, of traditions, and the affinity of languages favored the transformation of the Orient in the Islamic sense, and this transformation took place with such intensity and rapidity that the Arabs themselves had no time to grasp its nature or its dangers. Within less than a century, the subjects were fused with their masters into the Arab empire. The Christian Semites of Asia found in it a faith—illogical and contradictory in itself, but simple in its dogmas and clear—a creed more in harmony with their religious soul. And despite the obstacles, particularly of a financial and political order, that were imposed upon them by the Muslim government, they flung themselves into the arms of the new religion, abandoning spontaneously, with a feeling almost of relief, the troubling and nebulous subtleties of Christian dogmatics.

26 to 27

By these words, we do not mean to formulate a judgment of comparison, but only to state a fact. Any judgment on the relative value of human religions is not only odious and unjust but also erroneous in itself. Every people pours its entire soul into its own religion, shaping it as suits them best and pleases them most. The Eastern Christians turned to Islam because they understood Islam better than Christianity, because Islam was more Oriental and responded more fittingly to the demands of their conscience. Their conversion was a free, natural movement, surpassing any individual will or deliberate calculation; it was a genuine social movement, thanks to which conversion, from the very beginning, took on a character of near-haste, reaching unforeseen proportions and producing incalculable consequences.

Just as Islam appeared by accusing the Hebrews of unbelief and by denying the fundamental dogmas of Christianity—the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and so forth—the very raison d'être of the new faith was precisely to combat the West and its religion. All the preexisting religions of Asia explicitly lacked this character of direct and combative opposition, which was, on the contrary, an essential element of Islam. This was the reason why a moral abyss then opened between Orient and Occident, which had not previously existed, and which from then on fixed, on both sides and forever—even in outward appearances—that contrast and fundamental incompatibility which had first only been vaguely felt, and which perhaps can no longer ever be removed.

For the restless populations of Western Asia, so intensely religious, the new doctrine did not serve as a means to seize, en masse, the riches of the earth and the joys of life. Rather, it was embraced because it seemed to offer to the Asiatic spirit, to the great anti-Aryan, anti-European tendency, that immediate expansion and unity of direction which had previously been lacking, and which Asia had unconsciously been yearning for. The Asiatics became sincerely and ardently Muslim, much more so than the Arabs themselves, who, deep down, remained pagan and pleasure-seeking; and the thousands of new proselytes infused into Islam all that was dearest to the Orient. Out of hatred for their ancient enemy, they instilled into the new religion that same fanaticism they had inherited from the doctrines of earlier beliefs—a fanaticism above all anti-Christian and anti-European, which has left such a deep mark on the history of Islam in its long and often bloody vicissitudes.

27 to 28

In other words, Islam—and not by the will of its Prophet, but against the wishes and interests of its earliest followers, as a result of circumstances and causes unforeseen and unknown to all—became the tangible expression, the all-powerful instrument of the great anti-European revolution or reaction within the Asiatic conscience. Into Islam, Asia poured all that was most its own and most cherished, all that was destined thereby to separate it more clearly from the West.

It is owing to the effects of this gradual evolution that Islam was in the past, and will always be in the future, the inevitable adversary of Western civilization. This was its first raison d'être; it is this spirit that has deeply permeated Asiatic peoples; it is this that will be its destiny, its natural mission for an incalculably long and distant future.

In the civilized world of Europe, Catholicism and Protestantism—once such ardent enemies—have in our own day been able finally to lay down their arms. Thus Western peoples have consecrated to nobler struggles the immense energies at their disposal. In our civilization, so essentially nationalist and so inclined to secularize everything, religion has ceased, at the present hour, to be men's chief concern: many live and work without even troubling themselves about the official faiths. In the Orient, all this could never be conceived; it is impossible, because for Orientals, religion embraces and sums up the whole of life. In their vivid sense of loyalty to their professed faith, Muslim society instinctively recognizes the only moral support that is secure, the firmest force of cohesion and social solidarity.

The only possible faith, for many generations—present and future—of the peoples of Asia and Africa, is the Islamic religion, which consolidates and consecrates, as though in perpetuity, the great divorce between the two most celebrated families of mankind.

28 to 29

Islam, owing to the conditions of its origin and the historical functions of its long evolution, is thus destined to remain, so long as it lives, the long-unbreachable barrier, the defensive shield that the Orient will always oppose to the aggressive advance of our culture.

If, in this way, it has served to liberate—politically and religiously—a part of oppressed humanity, it also quickly assumed, and over the course of centuries accentuated more and more, the functions of preserving and defending the Oriental soul against its dissolution, against its moral death—death whose seeds are contained within European civilization itself.

Just as man, by a natural law, possesses the keen instinct and feels the need for his own preservation; just as in every animal species the forces that tend to preserve its distinctive characteristics, in harmony with the environment that surrounds living beings, are equally powerful and effective—so too, by an unconscious force, all the diverse human groups feel within themselves the necessity of maintaining, in the moral and spiritual domain as well, that which distinguishes them from others.

History teaches that “races,” in the sense formerly attributed to them, do not exist, for no human lineage has remained pure of every mixture with other families of mankind. All peoples are the ultimate result of an incalculable number of crossings and fusions, repeated without interruption throughout our millennial evolution.

Moreover, climate, geographical configuration, customs, traditions, and the necessities of the struggle for life—which seem rooted in the soil of the different inhabited lands, and which are always distinct in each—impose themselves upon every man who dwells there. Whatever the “race” that immigrates, it falls under the natural discipline of its habitat: no one can escape it. And just as water polishes and smooths even the hardest granite, so too do the mysterious and innumerable forces of nature, fixed in their places, tend always to reproduce a single type, which we call “race,” but which is above all the result of the physiological adaptation of a human group to the action of all the local forces.

29 to 30

This physiological state blends, in the evolution of culture, with all the moral manifestations of man—language, customs, art, religion, and everything related thereto—so as to constitute an indissoluble whole. As civilization progresses, through more numerous and repeated contacts with the other varieties of humankind, the various local families become ever more jealous of remaining distinct from the others, and, more than ever, they tend to maintain ethnic differences as essential reasons for life. It is nature itself that wishes to preserve the precious result of millennial adaptations.

Advanced civilization, while putting an end to so many wars, has destroyed the unitary utopias of the Middle Ages, which aspired to a single faith and a single empire. Instead, it has developed in all nations the consciousness of their diversity, and has given birth to nationalist tendencies, inflaming passions, inspiring the ideals of irredentism, of Pan-Germanism, of Pan-Slavism, and of other European nationalisms. The internal complications of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the

international complications of the Balkans and Asia Minor, are sufficiently well known to require no lengthy commentary.

Similar energies of conservation, which we recognize even in our own country, are found not only in our nascent nationalist party, but above all in the jealousies and regional or local recriminations. These are natural currents, atavistic tendencies through which the instinctive forces for the preservation of the species struggle against the cosmopolitan internationalism of our scientific, industrial, proletarian, and commercial civilization.

The progress of culture refines and develops the sense of individuality, which distinguishes itself from that of others. It spreads in the social domain through the diffusion of education, and it contributes to the process of general evolution, which tends toward ever greater differentiation in activity and in the division of labor—both intellectual and material—a universal law of the world. This law can be discerned in the development of industries, of commerce, and of the different human activities, whether individual or social, and it reveals itself in astonishing fashion in the marvelous anatomical mechanisms by which living organisms have adapted to the infinite variety of the conditions of life.

29 to 30

In 20th-century Europe, a continent modern par excellence, particularist passions—due to the decline of religious faith, the waning of ecclesiastical tendencies in the mind, and the emergence of other major social and economic interests—have taken on a primarily political and economic character and are, in general, peaceful.

In earlier epochs and in less developed cultures, the movement always assumed religious forms or aspects, and exhibited traits of violence and aggressiveness.

In Asia, when Muhammad lived, political reasoning was ignored; it was religious reasoning that prevailed alone. One religion—Christianity—served as the instrument of Western penetration, that is, as the coefficient of the exhaustion of Orientalism; only another religion could combat it. And that religion could only be Islam, which added to its Oriental origin the dazzling, fascinating splendor of the greatest military and political triumph that the history of Asia had ever witnessed.

In the complex and troubled consciousness of ignorant, headless, brutish masses, over the course of generations and centuries, after long periods, a kind of constant sentimental imbalance comes to form, the existence of which is at first perceived only vaguely and unconsciously. Lacking any means of expression or resolution, the imbalance between facts and feelings, between reality and aspirations, remains for a long time unnoticed or misunderstood, and is a perpetual source of unease without apparent remedy.

Then comes a time when a man, a class, or a nation, unknowingly, as a result of a thousand efforts and just as many failures by unknown predecessors, reaches the goal by inventing the sought-for formula; then the spark ignites and cataclysms ensue. Thanks to the unexpected rupture of the equilibrium, the accumulated but inert forces transform into active energies, which manifest themselves, as a rule, with catastrophic violence.

Just as Saint Paul gave expression and impetus to universal Christianity, as Luther did for the Reformation, as the French petty bourgeoisie of the 17th century astonished Europe with the great Revolution, and as 20th-century Italy sought the conquest of Tripolitania, so too, eleven centuries earlier, the Arabs united under Muhammad liberated the Orient from European domination.

31

When one considers in the Islamic phenomenon its particular aspect as a necessary instrument of differentiation, preservation, and defense of the Orient against the Occident, the following question arises naturally: Is this function permanent? Is there any way, any reason to foresee that European civilization could transform and elevate the Orient? Or must we perpetually face the bronze wall of a religion and a civilization that are irreducible and forever incapable of adapting to ours?

While renouncing any attempt to read the future, we are obliged to answer that the current symptoms are decidedly contrary to the dreamed-of fusion. When what might have seemed possible to the Seleucids failed, at a time when the entire world was pagan and possessed uniform traits now vanished, when attempts were made on both sides to realize this fusion, today such fusion is more difficult than ever. This is because the process of historical evolution has created an ever-greater moral differentiation between the Orient and the Occident.

Thus, it has come about that, on the one hand, we have 260 million men devoted to a primitive faith that has shown itself consciously opposed to the West, and, on the other hand, we have European civilization, which has achieved dizzying progress precisely in the secular and rationalist direction—that is, in the direction most contrary to the Oriental spirit. Any intimate accord is therefore, for the moment, impossible, and the observed facts suggest that it must remain so in the future as well.

31-32-33

Today, a crisis is brewing in the Orient that is not very different from the one that prepared the triumph of Islam, and certainly sharper and more extensive than that which, in a past closer to us, in reaction to the great hostile movements of the Christian world and Europe in general, produced, in the 13th, 16th, and 19th centuries, the awakening and exaltation of Oriental consciousness, especially Islamic consciousness.

The Asian peoples, humiliated by the irresistible power of European states, continuously oppressed by our dominating and tyrannical energies, offended by the disdainful indifference with which we treat their moral and religious culture, and envious of the boundless wealth that we collectively possess, are accumulating an immense reservoir of hatred, an insatiable desire for revenge, which constitutes a serious threat of political storms. And the symptoms abound: they have been demonstrated by the nationalism of the Young Turks, the Egyptians, the Persians, and the Arabs; by Pan-Islamism, or the set of unifying tendencies seeking to make the 260 million Muslims a political unity as they are already a religious unity; and, finally, by the incredibly alert, often beneficial and civilizing, but always intolerant and fanatical activity of the countless Muslim fraternities and religious orders.

The anti-European movement has even spread beyond the borders of Islam, to India among the Hindus, and even to the Japanese and Chinese. All insurgent movements in the Celestial Empire—from the Boxer Rebellion, in which the Muslim soldiers of Tung-fu-hsiang distinguished themselves in 1900, to the current republican movement that ruined the Manchu dynasty—are, in origin and sentiment, anti-European and stem directly from our invasive actions.

In the perpetual ebb and flow between Europe and Asia, Europe, through its civilization, its capital, its political and moral influence—due precisely to the immense military means at its disposal—penetrates everywhere in Asia today, introducing its administrative and educational systems, its ideas, its goods, its corrupting pleasures, its selfish and profit-driven industrialism, its diseases and vices. Every day, it offends and tramples upon the feelings of the populations, who see all their most cherished characteristics attacked by the dissolving acid of our culture and intuitively sense the peril of being reduced to a uniform human mass, fit only to generate wealth for the more powerful nations across the seas.

Railways, hotels, shipping lines, telephones, telegraphs, schools, roads, scientific systems of agricultural transformation, uniformity of military and maritime organization, industrial establishments, international agreements in the field of social hygiene, and, above all, the irresistible pressure of capital and economic welfare—all threaten to abolish every characteristic, every national distinction, and to always and everywhere marginalize religious elements—including the horrible, aesthetically offensive fashion of dressing in the European style, which tends to become universal.

33

Our civilization in the Orient, with its positivist, rational direction—driven above all by economic concerns—voluntarily ignores all religious questions and produces a profound moral disorder, which has very serious moral consequences. The medieval crusader came to the Orient to overthrow, with his sword, the faith of Muhammad and to ensure the triumph of the Christian faith. The modern crusader—whether a traveling salesman or a speculator in mines, concessions, military supplies, or construction land—cares little for Islam; he ignores it almost as much as he neglects his own religion.

In contact with this new materialist trend, the Orientals, still essentially religious, remain deeply unsettled: they take great care not to become Christians, because their repugnance toward European Christianity—as it exists under the moral circumstances of the 20th century—remains too sincere and too profound, and they continue to be more attached than ever to their own traditional religion. But if some, still in small numbers, adapt to Europeanization, then a socially fatal phenomenon develops within them in the Orient: they become atheists or non-religious. Our civilization creates nothing—or only a small number of things—that are socially useful for the Oriental soul; it even seems to corrupt it, to empty it of its moral content. It destroys the last consoling illusions of inherited faith and seems to push it toward anarchy; it has effects analogous to those that alcohol, tobacco, and venereal abuses have on organisms that are too young and too ardent.

34-35

But an Orient without religion would be like an Occident without law: it would be dead. Today, instinctively, aware of the peril of being morally annihilated, the Orient seeks a path to salvation; yet blind, perplexed, divided, poor, and ignorant, it gropes in darkness, accumulating error upon error.

In the 7th century, the Occident oppressed the Orient with a religion: the hierarchically organized Orthodox Church. Then the Orient sought salvation in another religion and found it, precisely in a religion possessing few dogmas, without priests, without hierarchy, and without monastic orders. It then became easy for the deeply religious Orient to emancipate itself, to lull itself with the illusion of absolute superiority, which consisted in possessing the supreme truth through the grace of a special revelation.

Today, the conditions of the struggle are essentially different: it is no longer a struggle of religions, but of economic interests and social principles, devoid of religion in the ancient sense of the term; the Orient has understood this so well that the nationalist movements of Asian populations, instinctively perceiving the defensive potential in the nature of the enemy's weapon, pursue primarily political and economic aims. We have instilled in their minds the notion—justly, at bottom—that our superiority derives from our wealth, the development of commerce, and the soundness of political organizations and democratic principles. In their minds has arisen the conviction that parliaments and electoral bodies are the panacea for all ills, the source of all goods: it is in the vain words "liberty" and "constitution" that the progressive Orient has deposited all its confused and troubled aspirations. From this arise the boycotts in China, India, and Turkey, and the so-called constitutional movements in Asian nations.

They wish to defeat us with our very own weapons! A vain illusion!

In boycotts, given the enormous economic power of the European races, the Orientals always end up as the losers, purchasing the same goods at a higher price through another intermediary. In the political sphere, their inferiority appears even greater and more evident. The dry and sterile logomachies of national assemblies are for the Orient merely centers of hatred, causes of civil wars and massacres. The parliamentary structures, such as the Persian *Majlis*, provide a clear proof of this. How is it possible to legislate with legislative assemblies and a parliamentary system in which Muslims and Christians participate with equal rights, where a "divine revelation" has fixed the bases of law exclusively for the benefit of Muslims? In the Orient, given the moral conditions of the populations, religious reason must predominate over all others, today as it did thirteen hundred years ago. The historical function of Asian religions, among which Islam occupies the foremost place, exists today with the same intense vitality with which the Muslim world, though torn by political discord, victoriously repelled the great threat of the Crusades in the 10th and 11th centuries.

35-36

The Islamic crisis of the 7th century was preceded by roughly a thousand years of Hellenistic hegemony, and such a long delay is due to the more pronounced torpor of a less evolved—and still partly barbaric—humanity. The modern pan-Islamic movement has existed for only a few decades, but even if events and transformations follow each other with vertiginous speed, it would be risky to make any prediction regarding how long it will take to reach its goals, or even whether it will ever evolve into a collective movement of action.

If one recognizes the correctness of the preceding considerations and the natural right of the Oriental world to preserve its traditional characteristics, to progress within limits and in ways most compatible with its sentiments, then the difficulty and delicacy of the work of European nations—with direct interests in the Orient, yet motivated by other humanitarian reasons to elevate the populations under their authority—becomes clear.

A secular educational system aimed at Europeanizing Orientals, such as the Americans attempted in the Philippine Islands, is surely destined to fail and to produce moral anarchy, with enormous harm to the subjected nations. One must either develop their culture by stimulating and strengthening local traditions, tendencies, and educational forces, thus favoring their religious evolution in all domains; or leave them in the intellectual darkness in which they are, so that their regeneration occurs through the forces inherent to each people, without artificial acceleration.

In the Orient, both Christian missionary activities—which aim directly at conversion—and secular schools, which disregard and wound Asian beliefs, should be banned. Our Asian brothers must become true Orientals and not imitate or ape a civilization they cannot fully assimilate.

36 -37

Among the moral and passionate forces that struggle in the Orient against European culture, Islam stands like a giant because of its internal vigor and combative spirit. Since it would be madness to think of overthrowing it—being the product of the deepest moral necessity of hundreds of millions of human consciences—and since its historical and social function will endure for a very long time, all notions of hostility toward it, whether overt or veiled, should be abandoned. At the very least, the only rational and scientific approach should be attempted: to foster and strengthen its internal development, to allow free play to the many currents of evolution it contains, which must act in ways aligned with the true interests of Islamic nations. Our highest task of civilization will be to demonstrate to the Orient that its culture can flourish alongside ours in full freedom and security, benefiting from genuine sentiments of sympathy on our part. Only in this way can the crisis, when it arises, unfold peacefully and lawfully, for the greatest collective benefit of all humankind.

We Europeans cannot, and must not, wish for the destruction of the Orient: the Orient has a right, by the most sacred principles of human justice, to its own life, to develop along the path assigned to it by a tradition older than our own. This is also in accordance with the biological and physiological laws of life, laws so elevated and complex that they are hidden from us in the clouds of mystery, yet such that it would be futile and imprudent not to conform to them. They exist and are stronger than us; if we ignore them, they will act all the same, to our shame and detriment. Let us therefore work with them, for their action can only be for good, for the continuous and unlimited progress of humankind.

We will then be happy to greet in the populations of the Orient not men “condemned” to decadence, but inspired to a proper and original resurrection, in a manifestation of strength and moral elevation. Let us hope that, on that day, Italy—placed by nature at the threshold of the Orient—will have assumed the place that suits and belongs to it, as a fertile force of peace, wealth, culture, and civilization.

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